

How to Avoid Holiday Depression

The holidays can amplify feelings of loneliness or anxiety. Realistic expectations and coping strategies can help when dealing with depression during the holidays. We found these great tips from *Luke Arnott of Suite101* to help you cope this Holiday Season!

The period between Thanksgiving and Christmas is often stressful. While some studies show that psychiatric visits and suicide rates don't rise in November and December, the popular perception of the "holiday blues" can still affect those who are already feeling low.

Feelings That Can Lead to Holiday Depression

There are quite a few common feelings that can be triggered by the holidays, and therefore add to the holiday blues. These include:

- *Unrealistic expectations* – The assumption that the holidays will always be a happy, perfect time can lead to anxiety and depression when problems arise.
- *Nostalgia* – Fond memories of previous holidays sometimes keeps the present from measuring up. Moreover, remembering past holidays as better than they actually were can turn every future holiday into a let-down.
- *Loneliness* – Holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas stress togetherness and family. But for those who, through no fault of their own, are alone during the holidays, the cheer of others can be a painful reminder.
- *Fear and anxiety* – Long, dark winters can take an emotional toll, most of all on those in poor health or seniors. But even those who don't fear making it to the following spring can get the holiday blues from shorter and colder days. This is especially true if they spend their days working inside, and it's dark when they commute.

No one group is immune to the causes of holiday depression. Whether they are based on too much pessimism or too much optimism about Thanksgiving and Christmas, such feelings can happen to anyone.

Ways to Avoid Holiday Depression

Luckily, there are many simple coping strategies for dealing with minor depression, anxiety, or simple end-of-year malaise. These usually involve a change of scene or attitude:

- *Revise expectations and priorities* – Realizing that holidays won't be perfect goes a long way to cut stress and depression for those with impossibly high standards. Pleasant surprises will seem like a bonus, instead of making up for a perceived shortfall.
- *Scale back entertaining* – Some get depressed during the holidays due to over-scheduling, or socializing among disagreeable company. It's okay to be more selective in attending parties, and to throw smaller gatherings of one's own. People who spend time with those that make them feel comfortable tend to be happier and less lonely.
- *Stay away from the mall* – If the pressure to find Christmas presents is likely to add to anxiety, trying to do so among crowds and displays can only compound the holiday blues. Doing shopping early, or even online, can reduce stress. Patronizing out-of-the-way local businesses, instead of huge box stores, can also help.
- *Take a trip* – A change of scene can be a good way of dealing with depression any time of year. Visiting a sunnier place can be a good idea if dark winters get dull. Trying a new experience closer to home is another possibility, such as an outing to a museum or a concert that's not on a seasonal theme.
- *Volunteer* – Spending time helping out at a hospital or shelter is a rewarding experience that can chase away holiday depression. In addition to keeping the mind off one's own troubles, volunteering is a good way to interact with different people in a new environment.

If none of these changes helps, or if the depression outlasts the holidays, it's a good idea to consult a doctor or medical health professional.

Holiday Blues Usually Not Serious Depression

Most often, what's thought of as holiday depression doesn't escalate into clinical depression. But with the holiday season being stretched out further and further – from Halloween to New Year's Day in many places – it's important for everyone to be able to weather the period calmly.

Unrealistic expectations, or natural feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, or anxiety, can all lead to mild holiday depression. Recognizing the possible causes of those feelings – and addressing them by changing one's priorities or surroundings – can be a step in dealing with depression during stressful times.